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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000206

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SUBJECT: LEADING SCIENTISTS DEBATE NECESSITY OF A NUCLEAR
POWER PLANT IN BELARUS

Ref: A. 06 MINSK 971 , B. 05 MINSK 337

Classified By Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) As GOB plans to build a nuclear power plant (NPP) gain steam, Pol/Econ Chief hosted a first-ever roundtable discussion with prominent scientists opposed to and supportive of an NPP in Belarus. Deputy Chair of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (BNAS) Timoshpolskiy promoted NPP construction and toed the party line that an NPP was necessary to reduce Belarus' dependence on Russian energy. Opposing scientists claimed Belarus would still rely on Russia for construction and uranium. Both sides argued over Belarus' competency in building an NPP and the risks involved. The spirited conversation ended with Timoshpolskiy suggesting the issue be discussed further between Ambassador and Chair of the BNAS. End summary.

NPP Will Reduce Dependence on Russia, Or Will It?

¶2. (C) The GOB is forging ahead with plans to build a nuclear power plant (NPP) in Belarus (reftels). On March 7, Pol/Econ Chief hosted prominent supporters and opponents of an NPP. Deputy Chair of the BNAS Dr. Vladimir Timoshpolskiy argued that, politics aside, Belarus needed an NPP to reduce its dependence on foreign energy, citing Russia's recent increase in natural gas and oil prices as "just the beginning." According to Timoshpolskiy, an NPP was a cheap and ecologically clean source of energy that powerful nations had long exploited and developed. Former Belarusian head of state and physicist Stanislav Shushkevich agreed, claiming that an NPP was vital to Belarus' national security.

¶3. (C) Former director of the Belarusian nuclear research institute Sosniy and current chair of the Institute of Radiation Safety "BelRad" Dr. Vasily Nesterenko doubted an NPP would decrease Belarus' dependence on Russia for energy. Nesterenko pointed out that GOB would likely rely on Russia for construction, fuel, and waste storage and, therefore, would remain dependent on its eastern neighbor.

Can The GOB Handle Atomic Energy?

¶4. (C) Shushkevich argued that an NPP in Belarus would improve Belarusians' standard of living by providing cheaper energy to households and industries. Newer technology made such plants safer and Belarus had the

specialists needed to maintain an NPP. Dr. Nesterenko disagreed, claiming Belarus had neither the specialists nor the infrastructure to build an NPP. Nesterenko explained that in 1989, he and his fellow scientists reviewed prospects for building an NPP in Belarus and decided then that the minuses outweighed the benefits.

15. (C) Nesterenko also noted that the GOB has still not properly mitigated the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster 21 years later. Belarusians were still eating radioactive food, living in radioactive areas, and not getting proper medical attention. Countries like Germany and France, where nuclear power is common place, had wealth and, should an NPP accident occur on their territories, were capable of conducting mass evacuations and providing citizens with clean food. Belarus did not have this wealth and, as history has shown, lacked the capabilities to protect the people should another accident occur. Therefore, Belarus did not have the moral justification to build an NPP.

Hurried Construction and Incomplete Plans

16. (C) Dr. Timoshpolskiy claimed NPP construction would take 10-12 years to complete. However, Pol/Econ Chief noted that President Lukashenko had recently demanded the GOB finish an NPP within the next 4-5 years. Timoshpolskiy, loyal to his president, went to great lengths to explain away the inconsistencies in Lukashenko's nearly impossible deadline. According to the BNAS deputy chair, the GOB was almost finished with preparing possible sites for the NPP and claimed that Lukashenko was only setting 20011 as the deadline for the planning and

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preparation of the final site.

17. (C) Deputy director of the independent polling service IISEPS Aleksandr Sosnov, frustrated with the response, asked Timoshpolskiy why the GOB was searching for a building site but had not considered plans for a waste disposal facility. According to Sosnov, building an NPP without considering what to do with the waste was irresponsible and another indication that Belarus was not competent to build an NPP. Timoshpolskiy, desperately trying to switch the topic, asked him why opponents of an NPP were not ridiculing Lithuania's plans to build a burial site on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. Shushkevich noted that Lithuania's waste disposal site was off topic, agreeing with Sosnov that if Belarus wanted its own NPP, then it should be responsible for its own waste.

Are the People Ready for Nuclear Energy?

18. (C) Sosnov stated that based on the results of recent surveys, one-third of respondents favored an NPP in Belarus and over half were against it. However, once the state media's propaganda supporting an NPP begins, the GOB could easily convince at least 70% of the population to support it. Sosnov cited President Lukashenko statements that an NPP would not be built without the public's approval, but to date the GOB had not asked the people for their opinions. Dr. Timoshpolskiy replied that before construction, legislation requires that the decision be put to a referendum, a process that involves not only parliament discussion, but in the end, the people's approval. Sosnov, as did other meeting participants, chuckled, noting that the referendum and lawmaking process in Belarus began and ended with Lukashenko's declaration that an NPP be built.

No Concrete Investors

¶9. (C) When asked, Dr. Timoshpol'skiy said that a portion of the NPP construction payment would come from the state budget, but the rest would come from Western, Russian, and Middle Eastern foreign investors. According to Timoshpol'skiy, Lukashenko was making a valiant effort to attract investment to Belarus. Shushkevich, however, argued that the GOB was unable to attract investors because it lacked civilized laws and a responsible government. Timoshpol'skiy could only respond that he was a man of science and did not know the details of NPP financing, suggesting to the group that they contact the Ministry of Energy if they wanted answers. [Note: We invited representatives of the Ministry of Energy to attend, but received no response. End note.]

Belarus Should First Conserve Energy, Find Other Sources

¶10. (C) Professor of Agrarian Sciences of the BNAS and coordinator of the NGO "Chernobyl" Center Dr. Ivan Nikitchenko stressed that an NPP was not Belarus' last option, claiming that Belarus could reduce energy consumption by 20% if it modernized factories and agriculture with energy efficient equipment. Sosnov also agreed, noting everyday examples he sees of poor conservation of energy. Shushkevich did not contest Nikitchenko's position, but noted that Belarus had no money to modernize industries and had a better chance of finding investors for an NPP. Dr. Timoshpol'skiy replied that reducing wasteful consumption was not enough to eliminate the economic necessity of an alternative source of energy.

¶11. (C) Dr. Nikitchenko suggested Belarus modernize its hydroelectric stations and invest in biomass and ethanol plants and wind power. German economic attaché Sven Hanns explained that although Germany had a large nuclear energy industry, the government decided to close all its NPPs in the next few years and switch to green energy. Germany understood that Belarus was a developing country that needed an abundance of energy, but suggested Belarus try finding energy in other places, such as wind and solar technology. Although expensive, it was less dangerous and friendlier to the environment than an NPP.

Comment

¶12. (C) Emotions ran high: although he claimed to be

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speaking as a man of science, Timoshpol'skiy kept to the GOB line and was sensitive to any reference, other than his own, to Lukashenko. However, he provided first-hand information about the GOB's plans and opinions, which drew strong reaction from the rest of the participants. Before the discussion, Timoshpol'skiy indicated to Pol/Econ Chief the hurdles he had to jump just to get approval to participate in the event.

¶13. (C) Based on Timoshpol'skiy's arguments, we can assume that the GOB is headstrong on the project and will build the NPP to Lukashenko's order, regardless of public opinion and source of financing. Timoshpol'skiy separately indicated to Pol/Econ Chief that BNAS chair Myasnikovich wanted to discuss with Ambassador in greater detail possible U.S. involvement in the project, although he understood the topic would then take on a more political meaning. We have agreed to meet with Myasnikovich to discuss various issues, but Ambassador will remind the BNAS chair that the GOB should not expect USG support for such a project given the current state of bilateral relations.

STEWART